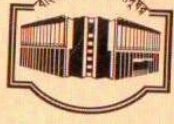


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# জাদুঘর সমাচার

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In the 1970s and 1980s, the key word 'heritage' became a topic of intense discussion and debate in England. Museum professionals and academics, amateur collectors, voluntary organizations and critics who participated in it felt that the dictionary word 'heritage' needed broadening to include natural as well as human phenomenon. To them certain sites and sounds, the morning mist, the medieval glass filtering the colours, the noise of harvesting coming through the open doors, the pastoral, romantic and religious evocation each recall aspects of an indivisible heritage. The agricultural vestiges visible only by the aid of aerial photography were considered as much a national heritage as the Tower of London. It was, therefore, prudent to 'let the national heritage define itself.' UNESCO likewise felt that the term 'heritage' needed broadening. "UNESCO has been a leading advocate of the need to broaden the development paradigm in ways that embrace the fullness of cultural dimensions of human development", observes Amareswar Galla.<sup>2</sup> Thus in its broadest sense by 'heritage', we now must mean not only cultural tangible heritages like objects, artworks, documents, manuscripts, sites, structures, sculptures, historical places and landscapes but also intangible heritages like traditions, languages, oral history, folk life, voices, values, adaptability and the distinctiveness of a people. In addition to 'man made environment', natural phenomenon also now comes under the domain of the term 'heritage'.

The paper is divided into three parts. A brief overview of the country's history and heritage is presented in Section I. Having done so, in Section II, we shall be looking at the various agencies through which cultural agenda and policy of the government is managed and implemented. Herein we intend also to measure the level of

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commitment of the State towards cultural uplift. In the next Section, we shall mainly but not solely deal with the role of museums in the promotion, preservation and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

## I

The people of Bangladesh are distinctive as they live in a natural environment unique to themselves, and have a proud history and heritage of their own. Their cultural life is diverse and rich. Relics, structures and monuments; traditions and value system; and the folk life are the result of assimilation of three great religions -Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Buddhist rulers ruled the land from the 8th century A.D., and the Hindu rulers succeeded them in the 11th century. Muslims conquered the territory in the 13th century. In the middle of the 18th century, however, their rule came to an end with the colonization of Bengal by the British. Through excavation, Buddhist sites at Paharpur, Mainamati and Mohastangar have now been unearthed. On the other hand, thousands of tangible objects of the last millennium, moveable and immovable, are all around us. Such objects like temples, mosques, old palaces, forts, battlefields, sculptures, artifacts, arms and weapons are our valuable heritage resources. We have also a rich collection of folk literature, folk tradition, folk arts and crafts. Through systematic study and research of the collections, we are now in a position to appreciate and understand our hitherto unknown past intangible heritage resources like our value system, traditions,

festivals, beliefs and rituals, philosophy of life and on life, folk music, dance and ballads, folk architecture, proverbs, riddles, etc. From his personal experience, Alan Dundes, one of the foremost folklore scholars said: "From many point of view Bangladesh may be one of the poorest nations on the face of the Earth, but I can tell you from the folklorist's perspective it is clearly one of the richest."<sup>3</sup>

## II

What are the agencies that are responsible for managing the cultural heritage of the country? What is the level of government's commitment towards it's development, promotion and safeguarding? In answering these questions, we must, however, remember certain realities and practicalities that are inherent in a least developed country like Bangladesh. The country may be old but the nation emerged as an independent and sovereign state only in 1971 after a bloody war. It might as well be reminded that the country was under colonial and semi-colonial domination for over 200 years. The colonialists, least to say, left the economy in ruins and the cultural property in shambles. Vestiges of old civilization were allowed to decay and degenerate with time. Therefore, virtually from the ashes the country had to be rebuilt.

Soon after independence, the Government of Bangladesh took up measures to galvanize the cultural fields. Its policy through gradual evolution is now to discern at culture in its totality rather than in fragments. Since 1988, a new



ministry by the name of Ministry of Cultural Affairs is in operation (previously cultural affairs was looked after by the Ministry of Education and still earlier it was under the Information Ministry). A State Minister is in charge of cultural affairs. Under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs there are several bodies or agencies that look after various components of cultural heritage. Some of the agencies have been given the status of autonomous bodies. These include the Shilpakala Academy (Institute of Performing Arts), Bangla Academy (for the promotion of Bangla language and literature), the Bangladesh National Museum, the Bangladesh National Book Centre, Bangladesh Folk Art and Crafts Foundation and the Nazrul Institute (to carry out research and promote the works of poet Nazrul Islam). These autonomous bodies work, at least theoretically, under the guidance of Trustee Boards appointed by the government. On the other hand, the Cultural Affairs Ministry directly administers the Archeology Department, the National Achieves, the Public Library, the Copyright Office as well as the tribal cultural academies and institutes located at Cox's Bazar, Birisiri, Ranagamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban.

The Archaeology Department conducts its activities as per the Antiquities (Amendment) Ordinance, 1976. All antiquities belonging or relating to any period in the preceding hundred years fall within its jurisdiction. The word 'antiquity' has been given a broad definition that includes 'any ancient product of human activity, movable or immovable', any 'ancient object or site of historical, ethnographical ...interest'.<sup>4</sup> However, the Bangladesh Jatiya Jadughar Ordinance, 1983 (the Bangladesh National Museum Ordinance) also provides the National Museum with many similar rights regarding the collection, preservation and

display of antiquities. Besides, one of the functions of the National Museum is 'to assist, encourage and promote development of other museums in Bangladesh'.<sup>5</sup>

Private cultural bodies supplementing and complementing government efforts in preserving and promoting tangible and intangible heritage have not been brought under any institutional framework, either official or non-official. In the absence of any survey, it is not even possible to provide any estimate of the existing number of private cultural organizations. They are mostly working in isolation, and some are just seasonal bodies performing during harvest seasons or on festive occasions when providing entertainments pay well. However, their importance cannot be minimized as these bodies have kept alive the traditional folk customs and culture over the centuries in the vast rural tracts of Bangladesh where three-quarter of the people live. Some private cultural institutions, it should be mentioned, are also provided with grants-in aid by the government such as the International Centre for Bengal Art Studies, Liberation War Museum, Bangabondhu Museum, Bulbul Lalitakala Academy (Bulbul Fine Arts Academy), etc. Such financial support, one can say, is a

sort of state recognition for the services they render to the nation in the realm of cultural promotion and development.

Regrettably, however, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs has remained a pariah in the overall development paradigm of successive governments. It is quite interesting to note that the budgetary allocation of the Ministry which is supposed to preserve and safeguard the cultural heritage of the nation is as little as 0.10 per cent or below that of the annual national revenue budget and that the percentage of allocation has a decreasing trend over the years (Table 1).

The fixation of low priority to cultural development suggests the failing perception of the policy makers to conserve and safeguard the cultural property yet remaining after centuries of despoliation by colonialists and ravages of time. To make the national cultural organizations vibrant and people oriented and befitting to an independent and sovereign nation, institutional development is a paramount necessity. For this, both financial support and skill development is vital. In the face of globalization, it is now urgent that the State should undertake appropriate measures to counterbalance globalization's negative impact on national culture.

Table 1: Annual Allocation of Fund to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs vis-a-vis the Annual Revenue Budget of the Government of Bangladesh 1998-99 to 2002-03 (in crores of Taka)

Year	Annual Revenue Budget	Annual allocation to Ministry of Cultural Affairs		Annual Allocation to National Museum
1	2	3	4	5
1998-99	28.950	30.00	0.104	3.80
1999-2000	30.219	30.51	0.101	4.07
2000-01	34.597	31.26	0.090	4.33
2001-02	35.479	31.83	0.090	4.55
2002-03	38,581	32.51	0.084	4.54

Source : Compiled from Finance Ministry documents.



### III

The Bangladesh National Museum has by far the largest collection of cultural property in the country. From the ancient and near contemporary tangible objects, we get to know much about our proud intangible heritage. For example, from the collection of textiles and costumes, we are in a position to know about our ancestor's choice of colour, pattern, ornamentation, motif and style besides the technology involved in the processes of weaving and spinning of fine and superfine cloth including muslin. *Nakshi Katha* or embroidered quilt stitched by village women with old saris with folk designs in red, blue, yellow and green are an admirable sight. The 'creations' such as these by simple village women are before the public when they visit museums. By looking at these, they are at once reminded of their glorious past in this branch of the craft industry. Traditional crafts on display like *Shakhar Hari*, terracotta models prepared by *Kumars* (potters) are remarkable for their artistic taste. *Shakhar Hari* or earthen pots painted with images of birds, flowers, creepers, and fish were used for carrying sweets on ceremonial occasions. In terracotta, the figures are those of animals, humans, birds, etc. Bangladesh also abounded in good quality timber. Using the inexhaustible forest resources, our indigenous carpenters, called *Sutradhars*, turned out splendid ornamental pieces of wooden work like partition doors, ceremonial chairs, railings of staircases, wooden bedsteads, wooden chests for treasuring valuables, wooden panel depicting Hindu mythological stories, intricately ornamental *dheki* (manual husking paddle) and even life-sized wooden female figures like *Sur Sundari* as early as the 11th century A.D. One cannot but admire the high artistic skill, dexterity, care and infinite patience that our carpenters displayed in making such objects. Bengali craftsmen also excelled in the making of ivory objects. One of our valuable possessions at the National Museum

is the excellent ivory mat manufactured from fine threads of ivory in Sylhet in the 19th century A.D. Such mats were used in wedding ceremonies. Bangladesh National Museum has a large collection of brass (*pittal*) and bronze (*kasa*) metal works, filigree works, silver ornaments of 18th and 19th century as well. The high artistic skills of 'handmade' metal works evoke the admiration of visitors. That the skill of our craftsmen reached a very high point of excellence before the products of the Industrial Revolution reached our shores cannot be doubted if one looks at the craft objects displayed at the Bangladesh National Museum. Folk arts and crafts are also preserved at the Folk Arts and Crafts Foundation at Sonargaon, in Bangla Academy and in some other private museums.

The sights of musical instruments like *Ektara*, *Dotara*, *Sharinda*, *Saroj*, flutes, drums of various shapes and sizes remind us of our popular folk and mystic songs like *Baul*, *Marfati*, *Murshidi* besides *Bhatiyali*, *Sari*, *Jari*, *Bhawaya*, *Ghambira*, *Baramasi* songs (pastoral songs), etc. Mystic songs like *Baul*, *Marfati* and *Murshidi* were sung and are still being sung to the accompaniment of an *Ektara*, one-string musical instrument, or *Dotara*, a two string instrument. Here it may be mentioned that in the fields of music and dance, poetry recital and drama, the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy or the Performing Arts Academy is the premier institution in the country. Among their functions include the promotion, growth and development of fine arts and culture; to organize art exhibitions, dramatic and musical performances; and the setting up of theaters, museums, art galleries and libraries and the acquisition of collections for the same.<sup>6</sup>

Tribal life with all their colour and gaiety are displayed elaborately through objects and diorama not only at the Bangladesh National Museum but also in the country's lone ethnological museum in

Chittagong. The cultural institutes and academies under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs are also doing their best to preserve the language, oral history, folklores, culture and traditions of the *Chakmas*, *Marmas*, *Murang*, *Rakhain* and the *Bom* tribes as well as that of *Garos* and *Santals* as their cultural heritage is being threatened by the larger community and the forces of globalization. The Bangladesh National Museum has also documented selected pieces of traditional music and dances of Bangladesh including those of tribal people.

The proud saga of the Bangladeshis who struggled for the recognition of Bangla language to be one of the state languages of Pakistan is fully documented in the National Museum and kindred organizations. Here it may be mentioned that Bangladeshis are possibly the only people in the world who have shed their blood for the cause of their mother language. They not only won state recognition for Bangla but also international acclaim in the year 2000 when the United Nations declared 21st February as the International Mother Language Day in honour of the martyrs who lost their lives on that day in 1952. In the Bangladesh National Museum, the blood stained jacket and shirt of one who died in the language struggle is preserved. Part of the Shaheed Minar (erected to honour the language martyrs) that the Pakistanis destroyed in 1971 is also displayed in the museum along with newspaper clippings, books, documents from archives and photographs of martyrs. Recently, the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy has documented the history of the language movement in CD. There is now also the Bangla Academy (established in 1955) whose main function is to nurture and develop the Bangla language and literature. We are thus in a position to show the world the resolution and



patriotism of the Bangladeshis in the preservation of their mother tongue through the courtesy of museums, books and by observing Shaheed Day.

Two galleries and some other space of the National Museum are exclusively devoted to the preservation of objects relating to our glorious Liberation War. The genocidal Pakistani rulers ruthlessly crushed Bangladeshis fighting for their democratic rights in 1971. The entire country rose to oppose the killers, rapists and plunderers and ultimately through nine months armed struggle freed the country from the clutches of the marauders. The spirit of the glorious liberation struggle as well as some evidences of Pakistani misdeeds are displayed in the museum. These include bullet ridden skulls, 'torture chamber' used by the Pakistanis, blood stained carpet obtained from the Dhaka University teacher's lounge, photographs of dead bodies, personal effects of intellectuals killed by the Pakistani forces and their collaborators such as dresses, pen, spectacles, books, watches, type-writers, tape-recorders, etc. The museum has also the first national flag raised in the Calcutta Mission of our country in 1971, and most importantly, the historic table on which the Instrument of Surrender was signed by the Pakistani forces on 16 December, 1971. These tangible objects convey important messages like love for freedom and democracy, and the determination of the Bangladeshis to regulate and control their own destiny. The Liberation War Museum in Dhaka, the Bangabandhu Museum, and a few museums maintained by the Defence Ministry preserve important fragments of the history of the Liberation War.

Under the oral history project undertaken from 1985 till 1990, the Bangladesh National Museum interviewed 146 persons from various walks of life, many of whom are already dead. From their narratives, we come to know details

of significant aspects of national history. We have also collected a number of speeches delivered by Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman during his state visits, public meetings and conferences at home between 1975 and 1980.

It is often pointed out that museums of the future will be museum of daily modifications of meaning, regardless of possible constants and that the defects of the museum of the past lies in the sphere of ideas, in its attempts to stop time.<sup>7</sup> Happily, the Bangladesh National Museum has been able to create a neutral ground of gathering for the community. The museum houses three auditoriums and two temporary exhibition halls. Various cultural programmes such as music, dance, recital, drama, magic shows, fashion shows, conferences, discussions, seminars, exhibition of paintings, calligraphy, sculptures are being held round the year. It also plays a central role in children's educational programme by organizing handwriting competition, painting competition, and exhibition of their other creative works. The museum also arranges weekly documentary film shows. We have guide lecture service for museum visitors, school bus for the benefit of children and mobile exhibition bus which displays cultural property in various thana and district head quarts. Besides, the National Museum has also a good reference library containing some 34,000 books. It has thus been fulfilling the expectations of the nation to a large extent by being responsive to the needs and aspirations of the community.

### Conclusion

Bangladesh has a varied and rich history and heritage of over two thousand years. Conscious of their past cultural achievements, both government and the people have been trying since the liberation of the country to preserve, promote and manage cultural heritage as best as it is possible on their part. The institutional framework of the

state for cultural management has been more or less chalked out, but a national cultural policy is wanting. Moreover, being a developing country, the state's priority is focused on economic and social development. Safeguarding of nation's heritage, and projecting it's past attainments and promotion, and development of culture has unfortunately taken a rear seat as can be gauged from the allocation of funds at the disposal of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. Museums, especially the Bangladesh National Museum, in spite of its various limitations including fund constraints have adopted a holistic approach at cultural management. In fact, it has already become a nerve centre of contemporary cultural activities of Bangladesh. But the country is populous and its culture rich, colourful and diversified. Much more needs to be done especially towards safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage before the negative forces of globalization creates further havoc.

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